



Memoirs of a time traveller



*Stephen Yarrow
interviews
Jon Pertwee,
one of the most
popular actors to
play Dr Who in
the cult television
series*

For as far back as he can remember, Englishman Jon Pertwee has been entertaining people. Born into a showbiz family, he has engaged in practically every form of entertainment.

He's been everything from a circus clown and a magician to fire eater, dancer, singer, radio comedian (he was a regular in *The Navy Lark*), actor in dozens of feature films as well as making his mark as everything from a scarecrow to a time-traveller on television.

In Australia to attend a recent science fiction convention, Pertwee took time off to talk to Stephen Yarrow about one of the most popular roles of his industrious career, that of Dr Who in the popular science fiction television series.

Stephen Yarrow: Of all the new television programmes that were produced by the BBC in Britain at the turn of the 1960's, none have rivalled the success or staying power of Dr Who. What for you has been the its secret of success?

Jon Pertwee: It's because it's escapist. I think people got so tired and depressed with monetary problems and kitchen sinks. They wanted to get out into another world of other thoughts and other fantasies. They always have done since way, way back. When Jules Verne wrote his early science fiction stories he had a zealous band of followers.

SY: Why do you think it was that, during your season as the Doctor, the series attracted its strongest cult following?

JP: This was largely due to the fact that I was the lucky one who came into colour. I was the first Dr Who to play in colour and that helped

enormously. Also, I had a great belief that it is much more alarming to have creatures from outer space come to earth rather than we going off into outer space and meet them. I recall my oft' quoted statement that there are few things more alarming than coming home and finding a yeti sitting on your loo.

I think also it started to build when we had this group called Unit which put the shows together. So it was much more of a team effort than the previous Dr Whos where it was just the old man and his companion.

SY: Did the filming schedule allow you much input into the character.

JP: No. When you think about it, the schedule is so tight when you're working 36 weeks of the year producing programmes. In one season we had maybe eight different stories with perhaps eight different

writers and eight different directors, and those directors would go off on their individual stories during the three months they had to prepare them. They had their own make-up, set design and costume design people working for them so naturally I couldn't have any input in anything like that because I didn't know what was going to happen and I was too busy doing the series being filmed at that particular time. So I would finish recording on a Saturday, put it in the can and shoot it, get Sunday off and then on Monday I'd be back and have a new script shoved in my hand.

The only input I could give was on that Monday where I could say, 'I don't think this will work, let's re-write it' or something like that. I'd discuss it with the writers, get it re-written and from that day onwards it had to stay as it was.

SY: It sounds like hard work.

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JP: Yes, it was very exhausting indeed in those days. You had to be standing on your feet from 8.30 in the morning and then be told you have to stop while a camera wheels into position to a spot on the floor which was marked. When you do that all day and then in the evening they say, 'Right, now we'll record the whole show' and you're supposed to be up and giving a 100% performance, it is well nigh impossible. I must admit I didn't like that method of recording at all. I much preferred the film principle where you get up and shoot one scene where you maybe rehearse and then you record it.

SY: It must have been daunting stepping into the shoes of the previous Doctor, Patrick Troughton.

JP: When it was announced that a new Dr Who was being re-incarnated, we made the front page of every national newspaper in the country. But that didn't bother me. I am an actor and I should be able to cope with that sort of thing. I come from an old theatrical family, studied theatre and work on the stage long before I veered off into radio and television and such things.

SY: I believe you were in one of the very first television series ever made?

JP: Yes, that's right. I made it at the Alexandria Palace with David Jacobs. David and I did an extraordinary show called *The Adventures Of Commander Highprice* which was based on a very popular radio character at that time. We did it under the appalling conditions of television as they were with banks of a thousand or so naked electric light bulbs and we had to wear thick, yellow make-up in order to look like human beings, otherwise you looked dead. It was absolutely appalling but it was good to get in on the ground floor.

SY: In the first Dr Who programme I ever saw as a lad, you were fighting the Daleks. How did they come about?

JP: I have no idea as they came on the scene long before my tenure. I never cared for them that much, I didn't like them.

SY: How were they operated?

JP: They had an operator inside who'd sit on little benches. They were very clever guys because they needed about 15 hands. One had to operate the flashing light which went with the words. They didn't do the words; they were done off-stage by somebody else. They also had to spin the whole machine and move it with their feet, not forgetting that they had to work the sink pump and the egg whisk. It was a very hard thing to operate and they did a marvellous job.

SY: Is there any one particular incident that happened on set that you remember as being particularly humorous?

JP: I'm afraid that would take about two hours remembering all the funny things. When I was making *The Planet Of The Spiders*, I had to drive a Hovercraft and they didn't give me enough rehearsal time. I didn't allow for a cross wind and I wiped out the whole of the left hand camera crew. I knocked them all flying but luckily didn't kill or maim anybody which I could have done with two open propellers. I went back and tried again, allowing for the cross wind, but there wasn't one and this time I wiped out the other camera crew. When I finally got it right, I went sailing off down the road and it was then I realised I had no idea how to stop the thing.

SY: You obviously have fond memories of Dr Who.

JP: Oh yes, very. It's still kept alive

now after they've stopped making it and it gives me an opportunity to travel round the world and come back to places like Australia that I'm very fond of.

SY: What is the future for Dr Who now that the series is finished?

JP: I don't expect they'll be making any more and I believe that it's up for tender which means the independent private companies can now bid for it. I've heard from a friend, though, that one of the early producers is thinking of picking it up and making a new series using one of the early Doctors. Two of them are dead so I'm in with a chance. I would work again with somebody like her producing it.

SY: Thanks for your time. Is there anything you'd like to add before we finish?

JP: Yes. I'd like to put in a mention if I may for Peter Budd who ran this science fiction convention here (Brisbane) called *Conquest*. I've never known a better organised convention in my life and he really knows how to put these things together. I commend him for such a fine effort.